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MEMORIES

... OF ...

EDWARD LILLIE PIERCE

... AND ...

ALEXANDER WHEELOCK THAYER



BY

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*Professor of Romance Languages,  
Boston University.*



## MEMORIES

OF

### Edward Lillie Pierce and Alexander Wheelock Thayer.

So complete have been the accounts in the daily press of the main incidents in the life of the late lamented Edward L. Pierce that perhaps no very essential facts can be added. Yet anything revealing the many-sidedness of the man must be of interest to his friends, who as Bostonians well know, were legion.

While the events of his career forcibly illustrate the keen interest he took in state and national affairs, making him what is broadly looked upon as the ideal public-spirited citizen, in the midst of such absorbing duties, he took care not to allow them to monopolize his time so entirely as to keep him in the same groove where many a good citizen is quite content to remain. Indeed it was his aim to become thoroughly interested in some one thing as diametrically opposed to law and politics as could well be found. His frequent trips in the summer to Europe furnished him an entire change, and at the same time were the means of awakening in an outside subject, his interest, one too which to his death was a real and abiding one—his love for Italian.

Between the years 1872 and 1884, Mr. Pierce was lecturer on Bailments and Corporations in the Boston University Law School. During a portion of this period the well-known and beloved Professor Torricelli had the chair of Italian in the College of Liberal Arts. He was one of the most familiar figures about Beacon Hill, and the students of those days will recall vividly his venerable form and long, white beard. I infer that Mr.

Pierce's interest in the Italian language brought him in contact with Professor Torricelli, whose classes at all events I know he attended for a long time, and for whom personally he had a great admiration.

When I came to the University in the fall of '87, Mr. Pierce came into my Italian class, told me of the interest he felt in the language, about his affection for my predecessor, the late Professor Torricelli, and of his desire to continue with the class just to accustom his ear to the sound and keep in practice. He attended regularly the two hour a week recitations and translated into Italian with much pains-taking the rather long and far from simple exercises a young instructor fresh from a foreign shore is wont to inflict upon his innocent victims. Not only in the dry grammatical forms involved in prose composition did Mr. Pierce interest himself with zeal which was a part of his nature, but he became through his strong personality the much respected friend of every student in the class. At times it has been our custom to read De Amicis' well-known story *Cuore*, and never on such occasions did Mr. Pierce fail to bring into the class an edition of this, which he had purchased in Milan, a magnificent edition *de luxe* full of illustrations of the scenes described, and which he took the greatest pleasure in showing and explaining while surrounded by an admiring group of students.

Ever since his connection with the class during a period of ten years, Mr. Pierce attended with a regularity that surprised me.

1829-1847

and that too during much arduous literary labor, when I knew that besides his own written work, he was keeping busy a large corps of clerks, stenographers and typewriters upon his "Life of Sumner." When he was obliged to absent himself I would regularly receive a communication from him, enclosing a postal card with his address, asking full information in regard to the lesson assigned for the next time. Even when abroad in term time, his interest in romance work showed itself, for I would receive a letter from him describing some linguistic peculiarity of the place where he happened to be stopping, and by way of illustration a newspaper printed in some of the Ladin dialects spoken about the Tyrol.

Upon his return he would continue his attendance, and many a pleasant word have we exchanged as he came in or went out of the class. It is my custom to vary the work more or less from year to year, using different grammars and texts annually. I remember one afternoon after we had been reading about some of the punishments inflicted upon unfortunate sinners whom Dante had come in contact with, as Mr. Pierce was passing out, he stopped for a moment, as was his custom, and dryly observed that there was one particular form of hell that Dante had omitted in describing punishments, and that was a hell for those teachers of Italian who annually made a clean sweep of the old text books. I inquired as sympathetically as I could what the trouble was with the present grammar. He replied that it was only worse than those I was in the habit of using in being so large that he could not get it into his coat pocket and was obliged to carry it about town in his hand.

My colleagues used to remark the well-known figure of Mr. Pierce on his way to and from the class room, and used to chaff

me in regard to the instruction, remarking that although they should much like to attend the course in order to acquire the *toscana pura*, yet they could not but feel discouraged were they obliged to pursue the course as long as did Mr. Pierce, and they must therefore look for another teacher.

Our little talks not unnaturally fell frequently upon the scenes abroad he had visited, and one of the cities not exactly in the beaten path of the tourist, with which we were both well acquainted, was Trieste.

This leads me to speak in connection with Mr. Pierce of another interesting character in days long since gone by, Alexander W. Thayer, for twenty-three years American consul at the port of Trieste, whose death in that city on the fifteenth of last July was duly recorded by the press, together with a bequest of \$30,000 to Harvard College.

Mr. Thayer was a Natick boy and graduated in the class of '43, Harvard, having for classmates, President Hill, Judge Lowell, Judge Richardson, O. B. Frothingham, C. H. Dana, and many others who have since figured very prominently in their respective walks in life. I have seen nothing other than the obituary notices in the daily papers merely outlining the salient features in Mr. Thayer's career, although the New York *Tribune*, with which he was at one time connected, may well have had more.

Mr. Pierce on his travels never passed through Trieste without calling on Mr. Thayer. *They had much in common, particularly in slavery times, in their ideas of public policy; to which the writings of both men—though in an entirely different vein—abundantly bear witness.* Mr. Pierce's collection of literature on the history of the negro race, and his own articles testify how ardently he felt on that subject; while Mr. Thayer's "Signor Masoni" and other papers

of the late I. Brown, a collection of stories which seem to me to compare favorably with the best we are producing today, portrays the scourge of slavery in such a manner as to awaken feelings akin to those felt on reading "Uncle Tom's Cabin." But what I wish particularly to bring out here in calling attention to Mr. Thayer in connection with Mr. Pierce is that while both possessed that sincere love of country which caused them to devote a good part of their lives directly in its service, both had undertaken to contribute one memorable gift to posterity and both had spent years in the accomplishment of that purpose—in Mr. Thayer's case this was the "Life of Beethoven," a work regarded in Germany as standard authority on the subject, while in Mr. Pierce's case his "Life of Sumner" remains his most enduring legacy.

Mr. Thayer did not, like Mr. Pierce, have the satisfaction of completing the fourth and last volume of his work on Beethoven. Three volumes had already been published in German, when in order to have time to finish the fourth, he resolved to entrust the clerical work of the consulate to some young graduate of the *alma mater* he loved so well, and thus kill three birds with one stone—help the young man to make a career for himself, have the consular routine work provided for, and lastly and especially, have time for the completion of his life work. It was my lot to be Mr. Thayer's clerk for over a year in Trieste (1880-'82), and during this period to become well acquainted with him. I really believe, had he held fast to his original intention of completing the "Life of Beethoven," while I attended to the duties of the office, it would have been possible for him to have done it. To be sure, his health was impaired so that he could not write more than two or three hours a day without fatigue. This was brought on principally by

night work in the *Tribune* office in New York, and he was wont to say that he was like a tree dead at the top. Nevertheless he actually did do two or three hours of literary work at this time, but unfortunately it was not on his "Life of Beethoven." A good deal of time was spent upon articles refuting what other biographers had written on Beethoven—principally assertions by Nohl, and, if I remember rightly, Marx.

Mr. Thayer was a constant newspaper reader, and a not unfrequent contributor to the topics of the day that absorbed general interest—exactly as Mr. Pierce was, for both of whom public affairs were paramount. In addition to this literary work which cut into his valuable time, he wrote, too, at this period: "The Hebrews and the Red Sea," a scientific study, the aim of which was to prove that the parting of the waters of the Red Sea arose from perfectly natural and easily explicable causes.

It is hardly to be wondered at that at the close of my services as clerk in the consulate the work on Beethoven remained no farther advanced than when I began; and although since then seventeen years have rolled by, the work still remains in *statu quo*. I believe it to be by no means impossible to find an educated German both willing and competent to bring the Life to a close in as acceptable a manner as is possible under such circumstances—for the work has appeared only in German. The original being written in English, it will not, however, be an easy task to reproduce in what may be hereafter written in completion of the work Mr. Thayer's literary characteristics of style and expression.

Mr. Pierce, upon his return from his frequent trips abroad, was fond of telling about these visits to the old Roman *Tergeste*, and to our friend, the ex-consul, whose marked

individuality had impressed him, as indeed it must have the many travellers who, passing through Trieste, stopped at the consulate to pay their respects.

Mr. Thayer was thoroughly Teutonic in feelings and taste. The Romanic character did not appeal to him; indeed if anything it was distasteful to him. Here his predilections were in marked contrast with those of Mr. Pierce, who was so enthusiastic an admirer of Italian. Mr. Thayer, on the contrary, was so thoroughly imbued with Germanic life, manners and speech as easily to pass for a German among Germans themselves. Although he had lived over twenty years in a city where the vast majority of the inhabitants spoke Italian, and in a household where that language was continually used, I have known him to be seriously embarrassed at the dinner table because for several moments he could not recall the Italian word for *spoon*.

In a modest way entirely unknown to any but those directly concerned, both of these men performed genuine acts of philanthropy. This spirit appeared for the first time publicly in the case of Mr. Thayer, when it was found, after his death, he had left his entire property to his *alma mater* for whom he had

always cherished a fond regard, as I had reason to know when in Trieste, from his gifts from time to time to the Harvard College Library. Yet how few know that he was instrumental in accompanying and guiding abroad in the musical paths he knew so well one who has since become perhaps the best known teacher and composer of music in this country.

In merely what is here shown of the minor conduct of life of these two men, apart from the salient features of which the general public is aware, is exemplified of what the lives of great men all remind us. Let the misanthrope reply if he will that the aim of writing the Life of Beethoven or that of Sumner is secondary to that of leaving the author's name to posterity. If one will be pessimistic enough to argue thus, the answer may be made that in the whole realm of human conduct, no action whatever can be performed where from some psychological standpoint the element of self interest is absent. It is only a pity that such self interest is not more conspicuous and that we have not more men so permeated with interest in their fellow-men as were Edward L. Pierce and Alexander W. Thayer.

*Boston University,  
September, 1897.*

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